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ABSTRACT

Existing evidence suggests that students do less well in writing argument than they do in writing narrative reports, and the reasons for the poorer performance are complex and interactive. In some ways argument is more cognitively demanding than narrative, but lack of experience in persuasive writing, and the interrelated nature of the writing situation and the assessment situation also play a role. A review of the literature reveals several lines of evidence which suggest that argumentative writing should not be neglected because it might be too difficult. Useful procedures for developing persuasive writing include the following: (1) topics should be on issues important to students; (2) students should be encouraged to engage in persuasive writing to teachers, peers, principals, and others when they feel strongly on issues; (3) large and small group discussions are invaluable in developing associated skills; (4) exercises to sort out what the students think are an important bridge to argumentative writing; and (5) students in the upper elementary years and beyond should read persuasive writing for exposure to linguistic conventions. There is no good reason why this kind of writing should be regarded as a difficult form to be attempted only by older and brighter students. (Forty-seven references are attached.) (RS)

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Research Review: Patterns of Development in Writing Persuasive/Argumentative Discourse

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Writing which argues a case is an important kind of writing. It is important both for academic success and for general life purposes. The coherent presentation of a well-argued case is required in university entrance exams, and in academic papers in a variety of disciplines. In personal disputes with business or bureaucracy, the ability to argue articulately and convincingly is an invaluable skill. The exercise of democratic rights and responsibilities requires citizens to look critically on society, and to try to influence, by persuasion, their fellow citizens and their law makers.

The importance of training in oral and written uses of argument has long been recognized in Western society. The argumentative composition, it is claimed, "lies at the very heart of education in general and of education in particular disciplines" (Connor, Gorman, & Vahapassi, 1987, p. 181). Recognition of the importance of written argumentation is reflected in the inclusion of persuasive/argumentative tasks in a wide variety of major assessments of writing in recent years, for example, in the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in the United States, in assessments conducted by the Assessment of Performance Unit of the National Foundation of Educational Research (APU) in the United Kingdom, and in the study of written composition conducted in fourteen countries by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA). In all three, the persuasive writing of both elementary and secondary students was examined.

A variety of terms is used for the kind--or kinds--of writing discussed in this chapter. Applebee (1984), for example, uses the term **thesis/support essay** for that type of writing which has a hierarchical, analytic structure and which requires that arguments be systematically supported (p. 87); **persuasive writing** for him is that kind of writing "where the attempt to persuade overrides all other purposes (as in advertisements or propaganda)" (p. 14). Martin and Rothery (1980; 1981; 1986) use **exposition** for writing which has as its goal "persuad(ing) the reader of the truth or 'rightness' of a proposition" (1986, p. 72) and which has the structure: **Thesis** followed by a variable number of **Arguments** followed by **Conclusion.** The terms **argumentative, persuasive,** and **argumentative/persuasive** are used interchangeably both in descriptions of the IEA study (Connor et al., 1987) and in reports of the APU assessments in the United Kingdom (Gorman, White, Brooks, MacLure, & Kispal, 1988). The IEA writers adopt a broad definition of the kind of writing they are discussing: "written persuasive discourse is considered to be that which integrates the rational and affective appeals and the appeals to credibility. . . (A)rgumentation is a part of persuasion" (p. 185). **Persuasive writing** is consistently used in the most recent NAEP reports (Applebee, Langer, & Mullis, 1986a; 1986b). Bereiter and Scardamalia (1982) use the term **opinion essay.** The preceding list, while not exhaustive, indicates something of the variety both of terms and of definitions for the kinds of writing discussed in various articles reviewed in this

chapter. The fact that there may be differences among studies in the type of writing being examined is to be borne in mind.

For purposes of this chapter, a broad definition has been adopted. The intention has been to examine the development of that kind of writing which takes a point of view and supports it with either emotional appeals or logical arguments. The first section of the chapter reviews studies which have examined persuasive and argumentative writing at various age and grade levels. The second section examines patterns of writing produced by young writers. The third section examines the interrelated questions of development, difficulty, and teachability.

STUDIES OF PERSUASIVE WRITING

Studies of argumentative/persuasive writing may be considered to fall into two major categories. In one category, students' performance in two or more kinds of writing tasks is examined. Such studies allow comparisons between students' performance in persuasive/argumentative writing and their performance in narration and, sometimes, in other kinds of writing as well. In the second category, persuasive/argumentative compositions written by students at various age levels are examined. These studies allow comparisons between younger and older students in the writing of persuasive discourse.

Studies of Performance

Reports of national assessments in the United States have consistently commented on poor performance in persuasive writing (Applebee et al., 1986a; National Assessment of Educational

Progress, 1980). Performance on persuasive writing tasks in the 1984 assessment are described as "dismaying" (Applebee et al., 1986b, p. 36). At all grade levels (4, 8 and 11), there was a high percentage of unsatisfactory responses and a low percentage that were adequate. Even on the easiest task, only 25 percent of fourth graders, 36 percent of eighth graders, and 28 percent of eleventh graders were able to write papers that were adequate or better; on the most difficult task, the percentage performing adequately ranged from 4 percent at grade 4 to 15 percent at grade 11.

In the United Kingdom, major assessments of writing were conducted annually from 1979 to 1983 by the Assessment of Performance Unit of the National Foundation for Educational Research (APU). In each assessment, a variety of writing tasks was assigned to national samples of 11- and 15-year-olds. For both age groups, performance on narrative writing was better than on persuasive writing, though there was relatively little variation between tasks in the distribution of general impression scores (Gorman et al., 1988).

In Canada, the provincial assessment in British Columbia in 1978 allowed eighth and twelfth graders--but not fourth graders--to choose to write a story or to argue a point of view. Both eighth and twelfth graders performed poorly on argument. At grade 8, for example, 49 percent of students fell in the bottom one-third of the 9-point holistic scale, as against 28 percent in narrative (Conry & Rodgers, 1978).

In Ontario, Canada, Freedman and Pringle (1985) examined the ability of students in grades 5, 8 and 12 in two school boards to satisfy minimal criteria in writing narratives and arguments, "argument" being defined as "writing organized around a clear thesis. . . which is substantiated logically and through illustration" (p. 26). At all grade levels, the number satisfying minimal criteria was substantially higher for narrative than for argument.

Several characteristic problems in writing argument are identified. One is inadequate content. Persuasive compositions have commonly been found to be shorter than narrative compositions (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1982; Crowhurst, 1978; 1980a; 1986; Freedman & Pringle, 1984; Pringle & Freedman, 1985). Students often fail to support their points of view (Applebee et. al., 1986b); content tends to be less original than for some other kinds of writing and gaps in basic knowledge are evident (Gorman et al., 1988). A second weakness is poor organization often associated with lack of knowledge of argumentative structure (Conry & Rodgers, 1978; Gorman et al., 1988; Freedman & Pringle, 1985). Even high-rated scripts by 15-year-olds in the APU study exhibited problems in managing argumentative structure due to such matters as "the sudden appearance of illogically placed information, gaps in knowledge, (or) wildly exaggerated statements. . ." (Gorman et al., 1988, p. 146). A third noted weakness is stylistic inappropriateness, particularly the use of informal or familiar language, and the over use of immature

connectors such as "another thing" and "also," together with the failure to use connectors typical of argument (Crowhurst, 1987a; Gorman et al., 1988).

Argumentative Writing across Age groups

The number of studies which have compared argumentative writing across age or grade levels is small. A few studies have examined comparative use of such linguistic variables as measures of syntactic complexity (Crowhurst, 1980a; 1980b; Crowhurst & Piche, 1979) or cohesion (Crowhurst, 1987a). Others have attempted to quantify differences using such measures as language functions (Craig, 1986) or structural elements (McCann, no date).

It is clearly established that syntactic complexity is greater in argument than in narrative or descriptive writing, and greater for older students than for younger (Crowhurst, 1980a; 1980b; Crowhurst & Piche, 1979). Moreover, Crowhurst (1980b) found a positive relationship between quality and syntactic complexity in argument (but not in narration) for tenth and twelfth graders, but not for sixth graders. Using compositions collected for an earlier study, she selected pairs of compositions by the same writer if one member of the pair was of high syntactic complexity and the other was of low complexity, and if the two were comparable in length. This study seems to suggest sharply different effects of complex syntax according to discourse type. Whereas effective narrative does not appear to require complex syntax, results of this study suggest a positive relationship between effective argumentative discourse and the

ability to relate propositions syntactically, an ability that improves with age.

In a study of the use of different types of cohesive devices by grades 6, 10 and 12 in argument and narration, Crowhurst (1987a) found that older students used more synonyms and collocation signifying both more extensive vocabularies and a greater tendency to expand and elaborate their ideas. Grade 6 used more causal conjunctives primarily because of their extensive use of the immature connective so; grade 12 students not only used fewer instances of so and more of other causative conjunctives (e.g., **therefore**), but were also more apt to express causal relationships by subordination. Twelfth graders were also more likely to use the kinds of conjunctives which appropriately signal the development of an argument (**first of all, next, for one thing, all in all, finally**), and used a range of adversative conjunctives (e.g., **however, rather, yet, on the other hand**) whereas sixth graders made little use of any adversative except **but**.

An early attempt to describe the argumentative writing of students at various age levels was made by Wilkinson, Barnsley, Hanna and Swan (1980) who studied the writing of students aged 7+, 10+ and 13+. Few of their 7-year-olds wrote more than two sentences; less than one third stated their position or gave even one reason; reasons, when given, were highly personal and context bound. Of the 10-year-olds, three quarters stated a position and gave one or more reasons which were, again, usually personal;

only 3 out of 31 had a generalized conclusion. Nearly all the 13-year-olds stated a position and supported it with a deductive sequence of reasons; two thirds of them had concluding generalizations. Wilkinson et al's cognitive measures of drawing inferences, generalizing, hypothesizing and speculating increased from age group to age group.

Crowhurst (1983a) used an adaptation of the cognitive measures of Wilkinson et al. (1980) in order to quantify differences in persuasive writing between grades 5, 7 and 11. The major difference between grades was on reporting, a category that reflected either narrative writing or reporting on "what is happening now." Grade 11 students used significantly less of this type of writing than students in grades 5 and 7. Seven out of 40 fifth-graders and four out of 40 seventh-graders wrote entirely in the narrative mode, and others did so partially. Eleventh graders also used more generalizing and interpreting than younger students, though differences were less than for reporting. Speculating was used scarcely at all at any grade level.

Craig (1986) examined the language functions used by grade 6 and grade 11 students in arguments written on two topics for two audiences (teacher and best friend). She found that grade 6 students used more of the relational and informing and interpreting functions whereas grade 11 students used more of the theorizing function. The heavier use of the relational function by grade 6 reflected higher use of the sub-functions, asserting

positive opinions (e.g., "I think this is a great idea"), rhetorical requests for opinion and direction (e.g., "Don't you agree?" "Do you think so Caitlin?"), and incidental conversational expressions (e.g., "So there!"). All three of these sub-functions are more characteristic of oral language and less characteristic of the more formal style expected in written argument.

Heavier use of informing and interpreting by grade 6 reflected the fact that many grade 6 compositions were more informative than persuasive. This was especially true for one of her two topics which, briefly stated, was as follows: "Your class has $500.00 to spend. Decide how it should be spent and persuade your teacher to agree." This may be seen as an invitation to do two things: to describe how the money should be spent, and to justify the suggestions made. Younger students wrote more on the first part (i.e., describing), some of them to the exclusion of the second part (justifying).

Another line of investigation has been to investigate students' knowledge of appropriate argument structure. Two important recent reviews (Hillocks, 1986; Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1986) identify the study of discourse-schema-knowledge as an important emerging area of research in composition. Scardamalia and Bereiter believe that learning the essential form of various genres is "a major requirement for competence in writing" (p. 783), a point strongly argued also by Martin and Rothery (1980; 1981; 1986).

As noted above, student writing commonly fails to approximate conventional argument form (Pringle & Freedman, 1985). Yet even young students appear to possess knowledge of discourse elements found in argument. McCann (no date) found that when sixth-, ninth-, and twelfth grade students and adults were asked to judge whether or not seven constructed prose passages were arguments, there was no difference between judgements made by the four groups. Bereiter and Scardamalia (1982) found that students aged 10 to 12 could identify a good number of the discourse elements of argument (e.g., statement of belief, reason, elaboration); they attribute this knowledge to students' knowledge of oral persuasion.

McCann (no date) compared arguments written by students at grades 6, 9 and 12 using a primary trait scoring system based on Hillocks'(1987) model of the structure of argument--a promising model that permits the differentiation of simple linear arguments from more complex recursive arguments. McCann found a steady improvement from grade to grade; sixth graders scored lower than ninth and twelfth graders in their use of claims (a generalization or assertion that something is true) and warrants (explain why data support the claim). Neither warrants nor data (grounds for stating the claim) were much used at any grade level.

Summary

Studies of persuasive/argumentative writing are not only few in

number, but also exhibit substantial methodological differences. While some conclusions may be drawn, they must be tentative.

There is substantial evidence across studies that performance on persuasive writing is not as good as performance on narrative writing--though it is to be noted that neither on the NAEP in the United States nor on the APU assessments in the United Kingdom was persuasive writing the lowest-scoring type of writing (Applebee et al., 1986b; Gorman et al., 1988). Persuasive compositions tend to be short and lacking in content, especially appropriate support for opinions. They often fail to exhibit appropriate structure, and are often marked by inappropriately informal and immature language, a fault not confined to argument but perhaps more acute in that kind of writing than in some others (Gorman et al., 1988). There is notable improvement in performance between elementary and upper secondary grades; however, performance by many twelfth graders remains poor.

The opinion is widespread, but not unanimous, that performance on persuasive writing tasks is unusually poor. While the NAEP report describes performance as "dismaying" (Applebee et al., 1986b), APU reports indicate little difference among writing tasks on general impression scores, and challenge the view that "argumentative/persuasive writing is an especially difficult, intractable genre for children" (White, 1987, p. 1). Whether the apparent difference of opinion between writers of the two different reports is due to methodological differences,

different expectations, or differences in performance between students in the United States and those in the United Kingdom is not clear. Light may be shed on this question by the IEA study in which arguments were written by students in fourteen countries with identical prompts and standardized scoring procedures. Early results seem to indicate disappointing results for argument in Finland, West Germany, and the Netherlands (Vahapassi, Lehmann, deGlopper, Lamb, & Langer, 1987), but final comparative results are not yet available.

PATTERNS OF EARLY ARGUMENTATIVE WRITING

Descriptive information contained in a variety of papers permit identification of characteristic patterns of persuasive writing by young students. A majority of students aged approximately ten to twelve write recognizably persuasive pieces in response to assignments asking them to persuade. Some of them write well. However, many of their persuasive compositions deviate in characteristic ways from standard forms. In addition, there are some young writers who respond with kinds of writing which are not recognizably persuasive. Several of these characteristic patterns are described below together with illustrations selected from approximately 1200 persuasive compositions written on a variety of topics by grade 5, 6 and 7 students for several different studies (Crowhurst, 1978; 1980a; 1986; 1987b; in press).

Non-arguments

Narratives. A small number of young students write narratives when they are asked to persuade. Sometimes the response is entirely narrative. Sometimes narrative appears as a kind of framework for a segment of argumentative writing. Sometimes compositions seem to start as an argument, but then "drift" into narrative.

Script 1 is an example of a composition which is entirely narrative. The task assigned was for the student, as a member of the class disciplinary committee, to persuade the teacher that a certain kind of punishment was appropriate for a misbehaving classmate.

Script 1

> One day while our teacher was showing us how to do our math, a boy shot an elastic band at me and I happen to be in a committee that decides what kind of punishments the children should get for breaking the rules of the class. I thought that he should get garbage duty for two weeks because that would teach him not to shoot elastic bands any more and besides, it hurts. The teacher is in the committee too except we had a substitute that day.
>
> So I tried to convince her that my punishment would work, but she wouldn't hear of it. Finally I convinced her and the boy didn't shoot any more elastics. (At least not in school.) (Grade 5)

While this composition contains an argument in embryo (a stated opinion and a reason), in form and function it is a narrative, an anecdote of an incident involving an attempt to persuade. Narratives were invariably of this kind. White (1987) also reports examples of narrative anecdotes describing moments of disagreement written by 11 year-olds in the APU study.

Sometimes the argument-in-embryo was more fully developed so that the narrative part seems to be a kind of framework for the argumentative writing as in Script 2:

Script 2

> I am on the school committee and we decide punishments for kids who misbehave. One of today's decisions was to decide what should happen to Fred Jones because he was taking advantage of his substitute teacher and he was also shooting things around the class. The committee met in the library. I was first to talk so I stood up and said, I think Fred Jones should have his parents phoned and should have to write 250 lines telling why he shouldn't flick things at people and excluded from any activities he's in for 1 month. I think he deserves these punishments because he could of seriously hurt someone, and he knows he shouldn't take advantage of a substitute teacher. The rest of the committee agreed to my punishments and phoned his parents and enforce the punishments the next day. (Grade 7)

In this example, the student is, perhaps, easing his way into an unfamiliar kind of writing by starting in a more familiar mode.

Script 3 begins as an argument with a stated position supported by a reason, but drifts into narrative halfway through the second sentence.

Script 3

> As a committee member I choose the punishment as followed: Make him sit in the office and do his work, have more homework, and have him in an isolated room for a week every month after school for an hour. After all he did take his eraser and fling it across the room when it hit Amy in the head and caused her to get a bump. Then it bounced back, hit the teacher, bounced up, and hit the clock; wich fell on the teacher. And the teacher's wig fell off! The eraser bounced and broke all the windows in the school! Also it bounced up and went in Mr. Stone's pants, then went down his pants leg, bounced up, went down Mrs. Smith's top, then Mrs. Smith had to put it on her desk. (Grade 5)

In this composition, the reason stated in the second sentence has such a strong narrative line, that the writer, perhaps, is side-tracked into pursuing the narrative, and abandoning the argument. Wilkinson et al. (1980) also found a number of compositions by 10-year-olds which alternated between stating opinions and lapsing into narrative anecdote.

Dialogues. A second kind of non-argument is the dialogue recording a conversational exchange between two people having a disagreement. Sometimes the entire composition is a dialogue; sometimes students break into dramatic dialogue in the midst of

standard prose. Script 5 is a response to an assignment asking the writer to persuade a friend to support a camping field-trip:

Script 5

"You mean to say you don't like camping," I said.

"No I don't. I hate being outside."

"You must be crazy. The fresh air and sunshine is good for you."

"What I really hate is the bugs," she said.

"They aren't that bad if you put on repellant."

"Well, what if you tip over in the canoe."

"You'll live. You can swim."

"I guess it's okay. I'll give in. I'll go camping." (Grade 6)

A particularly interesting example of dialogue-narrative writing is a composition written by a seventh grader who wrote a first draft as presented in Script 6:

Script 6

"I think the whole class should get to hit him with an elastic band." That was Gail's idea. Right now I'm in room 9 thinking of a punishment for Billy Jones. In our class we have a system where if a kid disobeys, our "crime committee" must find a punishment for him or her. So many ideas were floating around the room and here I am thinking for an appropriate punishment. Then suddenly it dawned on me. I put up my hand for about five minutes before I was noticed. "Mrs. Smith I think we should send Billy to work

in a grade 2 class for a day" I started. "No I don't think so, what good would that do?" She tried to make me forget it but I wouldn't give up. "Mrs. Smith what age level do you think shooting elastics around the room is?" She answered me quickly with a "that's not the point" routine, but she's not going to get me to give up that easy. "Mrs. Smith if I got caught shooting elastics and my punishment was cleaning the board it wouldn't stop me." I thought I was putting up a good fight so far. "Well that just goes to show what kinda person you are but we are talking about Billy." I was fuming now someone who shoots elastics around like him wasn't gonna get off that easy if I could help it. "If we are gonna let everybody get off that easy then I don't want to be a part of the committee." I know that sounded kinda harsh but I didn't think you could let someone off that easy. All Mrs. Smith answered with was "I get your point and I will certainly think about it." I thought I deserved at least a maybe.

Three days later, when the composition was returned for revision --without teacher response, or intervening writing instruction-- the student produced the composition presented in Script 7:

Script 7

Mrs. Bernard and members of the crime committee we are here to find a suitable punishment for those who deserve to be punished. I think I have a suitable punishment for those who have done something wrong. If they have done something

that a grade 2 would do they should have to spend a day in a grade 2 room if that doesn't work grade 1 if not that kindergarten if that doesn't work they must be a juvenile delinquent on your hands. I feel that having to spend a day in a primary classroom would be more than enough of a punishment and that person would not be a bother anymore. The embarrassment would probably be too much to be able to face those of a grade 2 room to have to be sent there again. I am very confident that this punishment will be suitable.

The student wrote first an able, appealing composition in a well practiced form of discourse. Having generated content by this means, she seems to have turned to the business of transforming it into the less familiar argumentative mode required by the assignment, a mode, it is to be noted, which she does not carry off with quite the panache of the original narrative.

The influence of children's experience of spoken language on such dialogue compositions is clear. Other researchers have also reported dialogue structures in response to persuasive assignments (Fowler & Glynn, 1983; Gorman et al., 1988; Gunderson, 1981; White, 1987).

Informative compositions. Compositions which inform or describe rather than trying to persuade are reported by Craig (1986), Crowhurst (1983b) and Gorman et al. (1988). Some tasks, in particular, seem likely to produce this kind of writing. One of the three assignments used by Crowhurst (1978, 1980a, 1983a) which asked students to decide how a misbehaving classmate should

be punished and to persuade the teacher to agree. Several grade 5 and grade 6 compositions in those studies concentrated heavily--and some of them exclusively--on the first part of the task, as in the following example:

Script 8

> I think the punishment would be is he should stay after school for 1 hour every day for a month or three weeks. I would let the committee decide when he could leave. I would give him extra homework, give him lines, and to clean up the school yard. I would give him extra homework so he wouldn't do that again. I would give him lines that says I will not shoot elastic bands again and I would tell him to pick up the garbage after school. (grade 5)

Possible explanations for young students' responding thus are that describing is easier than giving reasons, or that report writing (i.e., informative writing) is a more common kind of writing for elementary students than is persuasive writing. However, the difficulty of explicitly two-part writing tasks is also to be noted. Wilkinson and his colleagues found that comparatively few 10-year-olds attempted to respond to both parts of their writing task: "Would it work if children came to school when they liked and could do what they liked there?"

Wishes. Gorman et al. (1988) report a small number of compositions which they call "wishes." These compositions communicated personal likes and dislikes (e.g., I would like to

be a karate expert) but lacked any sign of trying to persuade others to share their points of view.

Characteristics of Early Arguments

Examples of responses such as those described above have been found in studies in various countries. They do, however, comprise a comparatively small proportion of responses to persuasive assignments. Most young students do write compositions which are recognizably persuasive. However a considerable number of them deviate in characteristic ways from expected forms.

Arguments written by young writers, for example, are commonly characterized by baldness and brevity of expression. Compositions as a whole are often very brief. Opening position-taking statements are usually of the "I think . . ." or the "No, I don't think. . ." variety without further elaboration of the topic under discussion. Reasons are frequently baldly stated and unelaborated. Sometimes a number of unelaborated reasons are given resulting in a composition that reads like a list, as in Script 9:

Script 9

> No, I don't think this would be a very good trip for my class because some people cannot canoe, and some people might drown. There would be too many rocks to carry your canoe over. There wouldn't be enough canoes.
>
> It would be better if it was in a semi-wilderness environment. They don't have enough food supply for all of

them. They wouldn't be any place to put up their tent. They would have to take warm clothes or they might freeze in the night. There wouldn't be any bunk houses. (Grade 6)

Sometimes the reasons are actually numbered, emphasising the list-like nature of the composition:

Script 10

I think kids should not have homework because:

1. It would cut out their social life.
2. They would be complaining of too much homework.
3. It would cut out any sports they want to do.
4. They can't go anywhere.
5. They would get detentions because they're grumpy.
6. no games to play outside.
7. no friends in the house.
8. They wouldn't be allowed to watch T.V. (Grade 6)

Compositions often lack any kind of concluding statement, as illustrated in Scripts 9 and 10 above. Where there is a conclusion, it is most likely to be either some kind of appeal or hope ("So please stop homework!" "I hope I have persuaded you to NOT cut our homework." "So please let us have pools. DECIDE QUICK.") or a single statement repeating the writer's opinion ("That's why homework should be cut off." "And that's why I think Ross Road (school) should have lockers.")

Sometimes compositions present a set of opinions on different, though related, matters. This kind of multi-statement response is reported by Gorman et al. (1988) for their topic,

which asked students to think of a subject on which they had a strong opinion and to persuade somebody else who did not share that opinion; such responses were also found by Crowhurst (1987b) for one of the four topics used, a topic which asked students to think of one thing about their school that should be changed and to try to persuade the principal to change it. Instead of choosing one unsatisfactory aspect, they wrote about three or four. Such multi-topic responses did not occur when students were asked to persuade the principal on specifically identified questions such as whether homework should be eliminated.

Comparatively few compositions are organized into paragraphs (Gorman et al., 1988). Rather than logical organization based on separate but related points, appropriately elaborated and illustrated, young writers frequently engage in associative writing (Bereiter, 1980) where each successive sentence relates to the one immediately preceding. Freedman and Pringle (1984) report that 50 percent of the arguments of their seventh and eighth graders were of this kind.

Weaknesses so far mentioned have dealt with content and form--with students' having little to say and failing, for example, to support reasons, or to conclude their pieces in appropriate or expected ways. Another category of differences between the compositions of young writers and those of older writers deals with linguistic matters.

Young writers use less diverse, less precise, less interesting vocabulary. They make monotonous use of a small

number of connectives (so, but, another thing, also). Sentences are shorter and simpler--perhaps significant in that syntactic complexity has been found to be related to quality for older students in argumentative writing, though not in narrative writing (Crowhurst, 1980b). Expressions and structures reminiscent of spoken language are common, like the appeals with which they frequently conclude. Students sometimes attempt to capture the prosodic features of spoken language by experimenting with graphic features such as capitals, underlining and exclamation marks (Gorman et al., 1988).

Not all the spoken-language features of the writing of 11-year-olds are interpreted negatively. Indeed White (1987) points out that "much of the best writing from eleven-year-olds gains force and immediacy from the adaptation of spoken language exchanges" (p. 13). However, the difference between good writing at age 15 and good writing at age 11 is clear. Whereas much of the best writing at age 11 reflects the conventions of speech--as, indeed, does weaker writing by 15-year-olds--able 15-year-olds have learned a good deal more both about written argument and about the text-forming devices of language. They have a variety of linguistic means at their disposal for conveying urgency and emphasis and have less need for the passionate personal statements and rhetorical questions of younger children.

QUESTIONS OF DEVELOPMENT, DIFFICULTY AND TEACHABILITY

The above descriptions of young writers' responses to persuasive topics invite speculation about the processes by which young

students construct arguments. They also invite discussion of the comparative difficulty of argument and narrative, and of appropriate methods of instruction and assessment.

Development

One suggested reason for young students' comparatively poor performance in argument is that their schema for written argument--indeed their schemata for written forms in general--is derived from the textual structures of speech with which they become acquainted first (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1982; Kress, 1982). Structures, like argument, which are heavily dependent, in spoken language, on the input of an interlocutor do not transfer as easily from spoken to written language as narrative structure and may therefore be expected to be acquired later.

Certainly the influence of spoken language on the persuasive writing of young students is clear. Some compositions--dialogue compositions--are direct representations of spoken persuasive exchanges. A large number of compositions which conform more closely to the expected form of argument show the influence of spoken language in the direct, colloquial forms of language used, and in the strategies used to persuade--direct appeals and imperatives, for example.

Narrative compositions written by some students in response to persuasive tasks also reveal strong evidence of spoken persuasive discourse. Script 2 above, an example of an argument set in a narrative framework, contains what is, in fact, the record of a persuasive speech delivered to the punishment

committee. When the writer of scripts 6 and 7 rewrites the narrative-dialogue of script 6 as the more formally persuasive composition of script 7, she writes what sounds like a formal persuasive speech. The first and last sentences, in particular, sound like the opening and closing of a speech: "Mrs. Bernard and members of the crime committee we are here to find a suitable punishment . . . . I am very confident that this punishment will be suitable." These examples suggest the influence not so much of informal conversational exchanges, but of more formal speeches delivered, perhaps, to the class. The conclusion must be drawn that the influence of spoken language--perhaps in a variety of forms--on written persuasive pieces is substantial and pervasive, that when young students write, the structures and language of oral persuasion are readily available and freely used.

Narrative writing in response to a persuasive task is attributed by White (1987) to lack of knowledge of the functions of language. She suggests that students may not know "how to use (written) language for anything other than an informal anecdotal/informative function" (p. 12). Scardamalia and Bereiter (1986), on the other hand, suggest that deviations from argumentative forms are "more likely attributable to losing hold than to lack of the appropriate schema" (p. 784). Some examples seem to illustrate such "losing hold"--compositions that begin as arguments but then drift off into narrative (like script 3 above), for example, or into excessive illustrative material (see script 5 in White (1987)), and never come back to the argument.

Such drifting off probably results from the use of a "what next" strategy resulting in "associative writing" in which the sentence just written, rather than an overall plan, triggers what comes next (Bereiter, 1980; Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1982; Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987).

However, arguments set in narrative a framework (like script 2 above) fit this explanation less well. They appear, rather, to indicate uncertainty about how to get started on a persuasive piece, and to reflect lack of clear, accessible knowledge of argument structure.

It is sometimes suggested that narrative writing should not be considered inappropriate as a response to argument assignments because arguments frequently make use of narrative and anecdotal illustrations to make a point, and because certain kinds of narratives function, in their entirety, as persuasive pieces. It is difficult, however, to justify such an argument. The anecdotes of young writers do not usually make points or illustrate points being made. In our research we have occasionally found a narrative by an older student which functions in this way. We have never found such an example in responses by fifth, sixth or seventh graders.

Difficulty

Poor performance in argument as against narrative has commonly been attributed to its greater cognitive difficulty (Bereiter, 1980; Crowhurst, 1983a; Freedman & Pringle, 1984; Moffett, 1968; Scardamalia, 1981; Wilkinson, Barnsley, Hanna, & Swan, 1980),

such views deriving largely from Piagetian psychology. Moffett, for example, describes discourse as an abstractive hierarchy, beginning, at the lowest level, with narrative, followed by generalizing and theorizing. Narrative, structure, which closely resembles the chronological structure of external reality, is, he believes, the easiest and most natural form of discourse for children.

There is undoubtedly some validity in the suggestion that writing a formal argument is a demanding cognitive task. It requires an ability to abstract and conceptualize, to deal in generalizations--particularly for certain topics and for generalized or universal audiences. Appropriate organization--critical for effective argument--is more difficult than the chronological ordering of information which is typical of narrative and some reporting styles. Not only the production of chronologically ordered text, but also the generation of usable content is an easier task for the story writer than for the persuader. Their whole world of experience is available to story writers who may take their narratives in any direction they choose, selecting from well known material appropriate content from which to fashion their stories. However once a topic is chosen by or assigned to a persuader, relevant material is considerably more limited. Information, moreover, is likely to be less accessible, stored in scattered nodes in memory. Generating content, always a difficult task for young writers, is especially difficult for universal topics or issues of public

policy requiring, as they do, information--and even vocabulary--somewhat removed from students' usual experience. Thus writing arguments presents both cognitive difficulties and difficulties associated with lack of experience and lack of knowledge. Gorman et al. (1988) comment that even high-rated scripts by 15-year-olds often had irrelevant or illogically placed information. Such failures may be due either to cognitive difficulty in locating relevant information or in using it logically, or to lack of relevant experience and knowledge.

Arguments, moreover, appear to require linguistic resources not readily available to young students. Argument characteristically has longer clauses and T-units than narration, is typified by more complex constructions such as nominalizations, and is heavily dependent on logical connectives to signal relationships between sentences. Ability in all of these areas increases with age, though the interrelationships between cognitive development, sociological factors, and language development are, as always, not easily determined.

Discussions of the difficulty of argumentative writing must address also the fact that there are obvious differences among persuasive assignments. As noted in the discussion above, some assignments are more apt than others to lead some children into different and inappropriate forms of writing. Assignments which ask students to find a topic about which they feel strongly seem to produce more of the multi-statement responses found by Gorman et al. (1988) and Crowhurst (1987b). Two-part tasks are less

well done; in particular, when a two-part task asks children to decide what should be done (e.g., about how to spend money or how to punish a misbehaving classmate) and then to persuade, more children are likely to write descriptively informative compositions without giving reasons or otherwise trying to persuade. In our research, when assignments were presented in conjunction with a colour slide--for purposes of controlling topic across different modes of discourse--there were more instances of narrative writing than for other kinds of assignment presentation.

Then, again, persuasive/argumentative writing comes in many forms and degrees of difficulty. It

> . . . can range from highly formal to highly informal--from a chatty letter urging a friend to visit to a political treatise calling for governmental reform. It can include emotional appeals and logical arguments, each in its appropriate place and proportion. (Applebee et al., 1986a, p. 26)

Not all are equally difficult. In the 1983 National Assessment for example, 25 percent of fourth graders managed to write an adequate letter persuading Aunt May on an issue of personal concern, but only 4 percent were adequate when the task was to convince the principal to change a school rule--a topic that required more general arguments than the personal opinions and examples that were appropriate for Aunt May. Miller (1980) found that her freshman students were well able to persuade an

immediate audience on a personally important topic but that they could not write effectively on a universal topic for a general audience.

Given the reasonable assumption that an attempt to persuade implies both a commitment to a position and a desire to convince an other or others, one may well question the appropriateness of any assigned topic as a stimulus for effective persuasive writing. Assigned tasks to persuade make-believe audiences on topics of peripheral interest to the writer seem to involve special difficulties. The problems and limitations of all testing are to be kept in mind in making judgements about students' ability. Large scale assessments and controlled research studies are inevitably a-rhetorical and a-contextual. They give limited information on carefully limited questions. The information thus acquired is useful in certain ways. But the writing tasks and assessment measures used in such studies must not be assumed to be appropriate models for instructional purposes.

Teachability

Elementary students have little opportunity to become acquainted with written argumentation either in their reading or in their writing. Even the easier kinds of persuasive writing receive little attention during the middle school years. Writers on three continents have protested the discontinuity between writing in the elementary school where the most common kind of writing is the "story"--a catch-all term that covers many kinds of writing--

and the high school where argument becomes the required and valued form (Martin & Rothery, 1981; Newkirk, 1987; White, 1987).

Yet, persuasion--as any parent can testify--is a form of discourse that develops early in the oral mode. Wilkinson (1986) calls argument "a primary act of mind." Interesting evidence emerging from the primary grades suggests that precursors of exposition and argument also appear early in writing (Martin & Rothery, 1981; Newkirk, 1985; 1987). Newkirk argues persuasively against theorists who claim that children first produce expressive or narrative writing (e.g., Moffett, 1968; Britton et al., 1975), and gives many examples of non-narrative writing by children in primary grades, including the writing of incipient arguments. A case in point is the argument made by six-year-old Sarah in a sign for a booth at a lawn fair where children could make their own pin-on buttons:

Desin-a-button
only 75 cents the desins
cuck.E.Cheese
Unicons rainbows
and much much
more
it's better pric
than last year
75 cents

The argument is quite complex:

Major Assertion: Buy a design-a-button (implied).

Major Reason: Low cost.

Evidence: The cost is 75 cents.

Evidence: The cost is lower than last year.

Major Reason: The many designs (implied).

Evidence: Chucky Cheese, Rainbows, Unicorns and more (Newkirk, 1985, pp. 297-8).

Though non-narrative writing occurs early and naturally in the first years of school, its value and importance are sometimes not recognized. Rather, teachers value and encourage expressive and narrative writing either because influenced by a strong romantic tradition deriving from the nineteenth century and stressed in Britton's work, or because they believe that children are not cognitively ready for what they see as a more difficult kind of writing (Martin & Rothery, 1981; Newkirk, 1985; 1987).

Influential voices urge the importance of teaching argumentative writing (Dixon & Stratta, 1986; Kress, 1982; Martin & Rothery, 1980; 1981; White, 1987). Given the importance of argumentative/persuasive writing in a wide range of life situations and evidence that elementary students have at least rudimentary knowledge of the genre, White believes that to exclude them from practice in this form of writing "amounts to a form of linguistic disenfranchisement" (1987, p. 1).

A steady stream of evidence indicates that little writing instruction, of any kind, occurs in schools. Applebee (1981;1984) found that writing instruction was rarely given either prior to

or during writing, that assignments consisted of little more than the presentation of a topic, a length, and a due date, findings echoed by Wignell (1987) in Australia. Insofar as it occurs at all, writing instruction comes after the writing is finished, and is delivered by means of written teacher comments and corrections. Such response is more often negative than positive, and is often vague with no indication of how to improve.

Martin (1980) believes that teachers make vague comments because of their lack of explicit knowledge about genres. They have good intuitions about whether writing is good or bad because they have an implicit knowledge of the requirements of various genres which enables them to recognize when things go wrong. But they cannot give credit and encouragement for what is good and right because they lack explicit knowledge. Such full and explicit knowledge might enable teachers to take what Newkirk calls another angle of vision which would uncover the competence of children writing argument. Instead of "a 'deficit' model which views children's writing as deficient adult writing, as writing which suffers from various cognitive overloads or breakdowns," a more precise understanding of what is involved in writing argument may permit "an incremental viewpoint which examines the approximations children <u>successfully</u> attempt" (Newkirk, 1987, p. 142). Such a viewpoint would allow teachers to recognize the beginnings of argument in writing which does not conform to conventional expectations but which yet reveals some understanding of what argument involves.

Talk of "teaching" argument does not, of course, mean only or mainly instructing students in the structure of argument. "Since text and context are in a deterministic relation, various techniques can be used to improve a student's writing without him ever knowing what schematic structure . . . (is)" (Martin, 1980, p. 28). What is important is for the teacher to know enough about the genre to organize writing situations so that students will master the genre. "In order to get good writing, a good writing context must be effected. . . That is, students must be clear about what they are writing about (the topic), who they are writing to (the addressee), . . .and why they are writing (what their purpose is)" (Martin, 1980, p. 27).

No kind of writing provides more opportunities for writing about real issues for real audiences than does argument. Issues constantly arise in classrooms and schools about which students are likely to have firm personal opinions. Alert teachers can easily channel the interest thus aroused into productive writing, addressed, for example, to teachers or principal. Opportunities for discussion and argument are also presented by a constant stream of controversial topics in the public arena which students can easily relate to. Topics widely and hotly debated in my region in the recent past have included the following: capital punishment (occasioned by a free vote in the federal parliament on the possible reintroduction of the death penalty); immigration policy (occasioned by the arrival off the coast of eastern Canada of a boat load of illegal immigrants); wolf kills authorized by

the provincial government as a measure of wild-life management; whether or not the provincial government should pay for lunches for hungry school children and expensive drugs for AIDS victims. These subjects--and many others--were widely discussed on radio and television talk shows, and in newspaper editorials and letters to editors. To take up such matters in school allows opportunity for students to read examples--good and bad, emotional and rational--of persuasive writing in the world around them. It also allows classroom discussion, an important support for writing which may follow. Finally, there is ample opportunity for writing for real purposes to newspapers and to members of parliament and other public figures on topics of current public interest. Teachers interested in contextually situated writing will find rich opportunities in persuasive writing. Argumentation need not be the sterile exercise on topics far removed from students' interest which Dixon and Stratta have criticized so eloquently (e.g., 1986).

CONCLUSION

Existing evidence suggests that students do less well writing argument than writing narrative, or descriptive reports. Reasons for poorer performance in argument are complex and interactive.

In some ways argument is more cognitively demanding--in the location of relevant content, for example, and in the organization and logical use of that content. It characteristically uses linguistic forms not mastered early. Again, many young students do not appear to have an appropriate

schema for written argument. Compositions start and end abruptly; reasons are often not elaborated; some students respond with unexpected kinds of writing--narratives, dialogues, descriptions.

While cognitive difficulty undoubtedly plays a role, difficulties of other kinds must also be considered. One such difficulty is lack of experience. Young students lack two kinds of experience: they often lack experience of the kind that would give them information and vocabulary to discuss topics of interest; secondly, they lack experience with written argument. They do not read argumentative writing and therefore have little opportunity to acquire either the organization structures or the linguistic structures that typify formal argumentation. Further, they are not usually encouraged to write argument, either because it is judged too difficult, or because expressive writing is more highly valued.

Another source of difficulty arises from the interrelated matters of the writing situation and the assessment situation. Persuasive strategies cannot be judged except in the context of the audience to whom the persuasive writing is addressed. What persuades me may not persuade you. A teacher-reader is not necessarily well equipped to judge the effectiveness of language and arguments addressed to the make-believe peer of a 12-year-old. Highly personal reasons may be inappropriate for some topics and some audiences, but they are not inappropriate for all. There are, then, some problems with assessment when the

assessor is not the intended audience, or when writing is addressed to no real audience at all, as is usually the case in assessments and controlled research studies. Appropriate uses and forms of language are learned when language is used for real purposes in interactive situations. Despite the considerable advances in recent years in devising more valid tasks in writing assessments, contextually relevant writing will remain difficult, especially for persuasive writing since the audience is critical to the means and to the language of persuasion. The classroom teacher, however, need not be inhibited by the constraints faced in assessments. The classroom provides rich opportunities for contextually situated persuasive writing.

Several lines of evidence suggest that persuasive/argumentative writing should not be neglected in the middle school years: a. persuasive uses of language appear early in spoken language; b. precursors of argument appear in the writing of very young children in the early years of schooling; c. even poor persuasive writing in the pre-teen years presents knowledge of and embryonic forms of argument; d. there are abundant opportunities for contextually relevant writing.

Useful procedures for developing persuasive writing ability include the following:

1. Topics should always be issued important to students.

2. Even in the early school years, individual students should be encouraged to engage in persuasive writing to teachers,

classmates, principals, and others when they feel strongly on issues. Such writing, of course, should be sent to the intended audience.

3. Large and small group discussions of issues are invaluable, not only for developing oral skills, but also for identifying relevant content and for the clarification of individual stances on matters under discussion.

4. Dixon and Stratta (1981) suggest the "ruminative essay" as an important bridge to argumentative writing. The purpose of such essays is to think around or mull over an issue, to sort out for oneself what one thinks.

5. In addition to writing, students in the upper elementary years and beyond should read persuasive/argumentative writing. The linguistic forms and the structures of argumentative writing are less likely to be acquired unless students are exposed to good models of various kinds. Discussion of such readings should cover both content and structure.

Attempts to persuade occur early in the life of a child. Argument, Wilkinson (1986) claims, is one of two "natural or universal genres rooted in the human psyche" (p. 137)--the other being narrative. There is no good reason why this kind of writing should be regarded as a difficult form to be attempted only by older and brighter students.

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